

CAP urges authorities to tax unhealthy foods to curb obesity, health issues

By [Audrey Dermawan](#) - August 8, 2024 @ 6:40pm



CAP president Mohideen Abdul Kader. -- Filepic

GEORGE TOWN: The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) has urged the relevant authorities to implement taxes on unhealthy food as a measure to curb obesity and related health issues.

CAP president Mohideen Abdul Kader said according to the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2023, Malaysians faced a health crisis of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) with a surge in overweight and obese individuals.

Mohideen said one major concern was the impact of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) and drink products on weight gain and the risk of several NCDs such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, and cancer.

Ultra-processed foods are high in energy, added sugar, sodium, and unhealthy fats, while being low in fibre, protein, and micronutrients.

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He said, over the past few decades, there had been a significant shift from consuming whole or minimally processed foods to UPFs.

He said this shift had been driven by changes in food manufacturing and distribution systems, increased marketing of UPFs, lifestyle changes leading to higher demand for convenience foods, and economic factors making UPFs more affordable and accessible.

"One of the most popular UPFs in Malaysia is instant noodles, which are cheap, available in various flavours and forms, and cooked within minutes. According to the World Instant Noodles Association (WINA), Malaysia ranked 13th in global instant noodles consumption in 2023, with 1,640 million servings.

"A new peer-reviewed analysis by Imperial College Business School highlights that implementing taxes on foods high in fat, salt, or sugar (HFSS), including UPFs, can reduce the sale, purchase, and consumption of these foods. This can lead to lower rates of obesity and other diet-related health problems, especially when combined with subsidies for healthier foods.

"The review, which includes findings from 20 studies worldwide (including Mexico, the United States of America, Canada, Hungary, Denmark, the Netherlands, Singapore, and New Zealand), underscores the global potential of taxes on HFSS foods. To date, 16 countries have implemented such taxes.

"In Mexico, an eight per cent tax on non-essential, energy-dense foods, including sweets, chocolates, sugary cereals, crisps, and salty snacks, resulted in an 18 per cent reduction in supermarket sales and up to 40 per cent reduction in other retailers. Low-income groups, who consumed more of the taxed foods beforehand, showed the biggest drop in consumption.

"Given the above scenario, CAP calls on the government to implement taxes on all types of unhealthy food and develop a long-term plan with incentives," he said today.

Mohideen said to address issues related to ultra-processed food, CAP proposed numerous food policy initiatives.

Firstly, he said, the relevant authorities should extend the sugar tax to include all high-sugar foods, besides sweetened beverages and premixed drinks.

He said they should also introduce taxes on ultra-processed foods such as instant noodles, snacks, and processed meat products.

"Develop and enforce stricter regulations on food labelling to ensure that consumers can easily identify the nutritional content of the products they purchase.

"There is also a need to provide subsidies for healthy, fresh, or minimally processed food for low-income households to make healthier options more affordable, he added.

Mohideen said the relevant authorities should also conduct education and awareness campaigns to inform consumers about the dangers of consuming high amounts of ultra-processed foods and promote healthy eating habits.

He also encouraged chemical-free urban farming and the promotion of healthy eating habits and nutritious meals to students.

Meanwhile, Mohideen said, consumers are also advised to avoid foods that have been stripped of fibre.

"They should also avoid those that contain large quantities of calories, fat, sugar, and salt, and have a long list of ingredients such as colouring, preservatives, and other additives," he said.